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TAGS: PGOV SNAR PREL MK KS

SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: DRUG BUST NETS NEARLY 500 KGS OF COCAINE FROM VENEZUELA

REF: A. PRISTINA 21

1B. PODGORICA 6

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4(b) & (d).

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Macedonia's biggest-ever drug bust, on January 7 at the Kosovo-Macedonia border, which netted more than 486 kilos of cocaine reportedly headed for Greece, is a good example of effective regional cooperation in a counter-narcotics operation. Separately, a counter-narcotics trial in Skopje that ended January 4 with four convictions and prison sentences ranging from 8 to 14 years, further highlights the importance of close, sustained inter-agency cooperation in Macedonia in bringing narco-traffickers to justice. End Summary.

MAJOR DRUG BUST NETS OVER 480 KGS OF COCAINE FROM VENEZUELA

12. (SBU) In their biggest-ever drug bust, Macedonian police on January 7 seized over 486 kgs of cocaine during a counter-narcotics operation at the Blace border crossing between Macedonia and Kosovo. The cocaine, which reportedly originated in Venezuela, was hidden in paint cans carried by a truck owned by a Serbian company. Macedonian authorities believe the shipment was loaded onto the truck from a Croatian-flagged ship at the Montenegrin port of Bar and was driven by a Macedonian driver through Kosovo and then to the Kosovo-Macedonia border crossing, where the shipment was intercepted and the driver was arrested. An Interior Ministry spokesman said the shipment was headed to Greece.

ANATOMY OF A COUNTER-DRUG OPERATION

13. (C) According to the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) Director of Police, the MOI's Organized Crime (OC) Department was tasked in fall 2006 to identify illegal drug and human trafficking groups active in Macedonia. OC officials reportedly identified several drug trafficking groups, including one headed by Stanislava Poletan, a dual national citizen of Serbia and Macedonia. According to MOI sources, Poletan was married to Ranko Poletan, a Serbian citizen and a former member of the paramilitary organization headed by the notorious Arkan.

14. (C) The OC Department started cultivating a confidential informant in Poletan's group, who provided information on the group's smuggling activities. Having previously been

involved in cigarette smuggling in Serbia during the Milosevic era, the group reportedly had turned to cocaine trafficking after the Milosevic regime collapsed. Using information supplied by the informant, the OC Department started a targeted drug investigation.

¶ 15. (C) On December 28, 2006, the informant provided intelligence indicating that a shipment of cocaine shortly would be coming through the region. Poletan allegedly had traveled to Skopje to facilitate the shipment. MOI personnel surveilled Poletan during meetings with several persons -- including the driver of the truck that transported the cocaine -- in Skopje on December 28 and 29. During the meetings, Poletan allegedly discussed the routing of the shipment through the port of Bar, and its eventual destination in Thessaloniki.

¶ 16. (C) Initial MOI intelligence suggested the truck would be carrying 76 kilos of cocaine. That figure later turned out to have been mistaken -- the truck actually was carrying slightly over 486 kilos of cocaine packaged in 76 paint containers. The truck was placed under surveillance as soon as it reached the Macedonia-Kosovo border crossing, where it was parked through the night.

¶ 17. (C) At approximately 0900 the morning of January 7, the Director of Police contacted Macedonian Customs and asked them to send a mobile scanning vehicle to the border crossing point, according to the MOI's report. When the truck was scanned, the cocaine was discovered and confiscated. The driver was arrested and is in custody on a 30-day detention order. The truck was seized and placed in storage, pending court proceedings. According to the Director of Police, the

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MOI believes the traffickers paid large sums of money to ensure safe transit through Kosovo, and offered similarly large sums of money to Macedonian contacts to ensure safe passage through Macedonia.

REGIONAL COOPERATION LINKS & COMPETING CLAIMS

¶ 18. (C) The Director of Police reports that the MOI subsequently notified Greek authorities, DEA officials in Greece, and Serb authorities of the seizure. The MOI provided Greek and Serbian counterparts with telephone numbers of suspected accomplices of Poletan's in those countries. According to the police director, neither the Kosovo Police Service (KPS) nor Macedonian Customs was involved in the actual investigation. However, ref A suggests that the KPS, working with UNMIK Customs, alerted the Macedonians to the likelihood that the truck contained smuggled drugs, which subsequently was confirmed by Macedonian Customs.

COURT CONVICTION IN HEROIN SMUGGLING CASE

¶ 19. (SBU) In the meantime, a Skopje court on January 4 sentenced four Macedonian defendants to a total of 45 years imprisonment for smuggling 124 kgs of heroin into Macedonia from Bulgaria in March 2006. The two-year operation that led to the arrest of the defendants involved close cooperation and intelligence-sharing between the MOI's Organized Crime (OC) Department, the Special OC Prosecutor's Office (the OC prosecutor on the case had received extensive OPDAT training), and Macedonian Customs. One of the defendants was tried and convicted in absentia. The other three received sentences ranging from 8 years imprisonment to 14 years.

COMMENT

¶ 10. (SBU) The Blace operation appears to have succeeded because of the cooperation between Macedonian, UNMIK, and Kosovar officials. As such, it highlights the importance of regional cooperation in counter-narcotics operations. The court conviction in the Bulgarian heroin smuggling case

further highlights the effectiveness of close and sustained inter-agency cooperation in bringing narco-traffickers to justice. Both cases suggest a measurable improvement in the GOM's ability and willingness to intercept illicit drug shipments and to prosecute and convict drug traffickers.

MILOVANOVIC